

Center for Behavioral Health Studies

Alcohol Craving and Relapse Prevention

There is evidence that recovering alcoholics are likely to experience at least one relapse over the four-year period following treatment. Despite some promising leads, no studies have shown any set of treatment modalities that can effectively prevent relapse in a predictable manner.

Research indicates similar relapse rates for alcohol, nicotine, and heroin addiction. This suggests that the relapse mechanism for many addictive disorders may share common biochemical, behavioral, or cognitive components. **Integrating relapse data for these different addictive disorders may well provide new insights into relapse prevention services.**

Relapse and Impaired Control

Impaired control has been suggested as one determinant for relapse, yet the term is variously defined. **One early theory suggests that impaired control has a two-part meaning. First, it includes the unpredictability of an alcoholic to refrain from the first drink. Secondly, control is viewed as an inability to stop drinking once started.**

Several modern relapse theories are built on the concept of craving. Some behavioral researchers argue that the idea of craving is circular. Others minimize physiological urges while stressing the relationship between the behavior of drinking and the environmental stimuli that prompt the behavior.

More practical studies by scientists Ludwig and Stark find no problem with the term craving. They believe that **“craving is simply asking whether a person who has not yet drunk alcohol feels a need for it.”**

Some studies have suggested that alcoholics experience classical Pavlovian conditioning.



There appears to be a pairing of external (e.g., a familiar bar) and internal (e.g., negative mood states) stimuli to these reinforcing effects of alcohol.

Ludwig and Stark believe that symptoms of craving are elicited by various combinations of these internal and

external cues. These cues evoke both the memory of the euphoric effects of alcohol and discomfort of withdrawal.

Relapse Prevention

Several relapse prevention models incorporate the core belief that an individual's expectations about his or her ability to cope with a potential drinking situation will affect the outcome of their treatment experience.

According to Professor Marlatt and colleagues, the transition from the initial drink following abstinence to excessive drinking (relapse) depends on an individual's reaction to the first drink.

Investigators now believe that relapse is influenced by the interaction of conditioned high-risk environmental situations. Studies of relapse episodes showed that **relapses were most often associated with:**

- **frustration and anger**
- **social pressure**
- **personal temptation**



Summary

Marlatt argues that alcoholics must assume a very active role in changing their own drinking behavior.

First, they must be able to modify their lifestyles in coping with stress and high-risk situations.

Secondly, they must identify and respond appropriately to internal and external cues by having them serve as relapse warning signals.

Third, they must be able to implement self-control strategies to reduce the risk of relapse.

Chaney and associates have shown that, "alcoholics can learn problem-solving skills by rehearsing alternative behaviors for specific high-risk situations".

Researchers now believe that skills training can be an useful treatment component to relapse prevention.

Editorial Staff

Editor in Chief:
David W. Cunningham

Assistant Editors:
Hugh Kilbourne
Kay Seder

Art/Graphics Designer:
Lenny Joyce



Center for Behavioral
Health Studies

Rimrock Foundation
P.O. Box 30374
Billings, MT 59107

NON-PROFIT
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
BILLINGS, MT
PERMIT #142

For further information on Rimrock Foundation's treatment of Addictions, call Jen Porter, Admissions Supervisor at 1-800-227-3953 or 1-406-248-3175, or visit our Web site at www.rimrock.org. For more educational information on Addictions, contact the Rimrock Foundation Library at the above numbers.